Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 26

1st Base

So-o…

‘Please; please don’t say anything to Margot about it.’

He nods, but that’s not good enough. I need a verbal commitment. I need to hear the words come out of his mouth. So, I add; ‘Do you swear? In your life?’ If Margot was to ever find out - I would want to die.

‘All right; I swear. I mean; we haven’t even spoken since she left.’

I let out a huge breath. ‘Great. Thanks.’ I’m about to walk away; but then Josh stops me.

‘Who’s the guy?’

‘What guy?’

‘The guy you’re dating.’

That’s when I see him. Marcel Kavinsky; walking down the hallway. Like magic.

Beautiful; dark-haired Marcel. He deserves background music; he looks so good. ‘Marcel.

Kavinsky. Marcel Kavinsky!’ The bell rings, and I sail past Josh. ‘I’ve got to go! Talk later; Josh!’

‘Wait!’ He calls out.

I run up to Marcel and launch myself into his arms like a shot out of a cannon. I’ve got my arms around his neck and my legs hooked around his waist, and I don’t even know how my body knows how, because I’ve for sure never touched a boy like this in my life.

It’s like we’re in a movie and the music is swelling and waves are crashing around us.

Except for the fact that Marcel's expression is registering pure shock and disbelief and a drop of amusement because Marcel likes to be amused. Raising his eyebrows; he says, 'Lara Jean? What the… Hell?'

I do not answer. I just kissed him.

My first thought is- I have muscle memory of his lips.

My second thought is- I hope Josh is watching. He must be watching, or it is all for nothing.

My heart is beating so fast I forget to be afraid of doing it wrong. Because for about three seconds; he is kissing me back. Marcel Kavinsky; the boy of every girl's dream; is kissing me back.

I have not kissed that many boys before. Marcel Kavinsky; John Ambrose McClaren; Allie Feldman's cousin with the weird eye, and now Marcel again.

I open my eyes and Marcel's staring at me with that same expression on his face. Very sincerely I

say, ‘Thank you.’ He replies, ‘You’re welcome;’ and I hop out of his arms and sprint off in the opposite direction.

It takes all the history class and most of English for my heart rate to slow down. I kissed Marcel Kavinsky. In the hallway; in front of everybody. In front of Josh.

I did not think this thing through. That is what Margot would say, including and especially the ‘obviously.’ If I had thought, it through; I would have made up a boyfriend and not picked an actual person. More

specifically, I would not have picked Marcel. He is the worst person I could have picked because everybody knows him. He’s Marcel -; for Pete’s sake. - of Gen and-.

It does not matter that they are broken up. They are an institution at this institution.

I spend the rest of the day hiding out. I even eat my lunch in the girls’ bathroom.

My last class of the day is the Gym. With Marcel. Coach White gives us a reintroduction to the weight room,

and we must practice using the machines. Marcel and his friends already know how to use them; so, they separate off from the group and have a free- throw contest, and I do not get a chance to talk to him. At one point he catches me looking at him and he winks, which makes me want to shrivel up and die.

After class is over; I wait for Marcel outside the boys' locker room; planning out what I am going to say; how I am going to explain it. I will start with; 'So about this morning-;' and then

I will give a little laugh; like how hilarious that was!

Marcel's the last one to come out. His hair is wet from a shower. Weirdly, boys take showers at the school since girls never do. I wonder if they have stalled in there or just a bunch of showerheads and no privacy.

'Hey;' he says when he sees me, but he does not stop.

To his back I hurriedly say; 'So about this morning -' I laugh, and Marcel turns around and just looks at me.

‘Oh yes. What was that all about?’

‘It was a dumb joke;’ I begin.

Marcel crosses his arms and leans against the lockers. ‘Did it have anything to do with that letter you sent me?’

‘No. I mean; yes. Tangentially.’

‘Look;’ he says kindly. ‘I think you’re cute. In a quirky way. But Gen and I just broke up, and I’m not in a place right now where I won't be somebody’s boyfriend.’

So-o…

My mouth drops. Marcel - is giving me the brush-off! I do not even like him, and he is giving me the brush-off. Also; ‘quirky’? How am I ‘quirky’? ‘Cute in a quirky way’ is an insult. A total insult!

He is still talking; still giving me kind eyes. ‘I mean; I’m flattered. That you would like me all this time- it’s flattering; you know?’

That is enough. That is enough. ‘I don’t like you;’ I say loudly. ‘So-

there’s no reason you should feel flattered.’

Now it is Marcel’s turn to look taken aback. He quickly looks around to see if anyone heard. He leans forward and whispers; ‘Then why did you kiss me?’

‘I kissed you because I don’t like you;’ I explain like this should be obvious. ‘See; my letters got sent out by someone. Not me.’

‘Wait a minute. ‘Letters’? How many of us are there?’

‘Five. And the guy I do like got one too.’

Marcel frowns. ‘Who?’

Why should I tell him anything? ‘That’s - personal.’

‘Hey; I have a right to know since you pulled me into this little drama;’ Marcel says with a pointed look. I suck on my top lip and shake my head and he add; ‘If there even really is a guy.’

‘There is such a guy! It’s Josh Sanderson.’

‘Doesn’t he go out with your sister?’

I nod- I am surprised he even knows this. I did not think Josh and Margot would be on his radar. ‘They've broken up now. But I do not want him to know I have feelings for him - for obvious reasons. So - I told him you were my boyfriend.’

‘So- you used me to save face?’

‘I mean; basically.’ Exactly.

‘You’re a funny girl.’

First- I am cute in a quirky way; now I am a funny girl. I know what that means. ‘Anyway; thanks for going along with it; Marcel.’ I flash him what I hope is a winning smile and turn on my heel to go. ‘See yah!’

Marcel reaches out and grabs me by the backpack. ‘Wait- so Sanderson thinks I’m your boyfriend now; right? So, what are you going to tell him?’

I try to shrug him loose, but he will not let go. ‘I haven’t figured that

part out yet. But I will.' I lift my chin. 'I'm quirky like that.'

Marcel laughs aloud; his mouth opens wide. 'You too are funny; Lara Jean.'

MY PHONE VIBRATES NEXT TO me. It is Chris.

'Is it true?' I can hear her puffing on her cigarette.

'Is what is true?'

I am lying on my bed, on my stomach. My mom told me that if my stomach hurt; I should lie on my

stomach, and it will warm up and feel better.

I do not think it is helping; though. My stomach's been in knots all day.

'Did you run-up to - and kiss him like a maniac?'

I close my eyes and whimper. I wish I could say no because I am not the kind of person to do that. But I did do it; so, I guess I am. But my reasons were good!

I want to tell Chris the truth, but the whole thing is just so embarrassing. ‘Yeah. I went up to Marcel- and kissed him. Like a maniac.’

Chris exhales. ‘Damn!’

‘I know.’

‘What the hell were you thinking?’

‘Honestly? I do not even know. I just did it.’

‘Shit. I did not know you had it in you. I’m kind of impressed.’

‘Thanks.’

‘But you know Gen’s going to come after you; right? They may be broken up.

but she still thinks she owns his ass.’

My stomach lurches. ‘Yeah. I know. I’m scared; Chris.’

‘I’ll do my best to protect you from her, but you know how she is. You better watch your back.’ Chris hangs up.

I feel even worse than before. If Margot were here; she would say that writing those letters was pointless in the first place, and she would get on me about telling such a big lie. Then she would help me figure out a solution. But Margot's not here; she is in Scotland- and even bigger than that; she is the one person I cannot talk to. She can never-never-never know how I felt about Josh.

After a while, I get out of bed and wander into Kellie's room. She is on the floor rifling through her bottom

drawer. Without looking up, she says, ‘Have you seen my pajamas with the hearts?’

‘I washed them yesterday; so, they’re probably in the dryer. Tonight, do you want to watch a movie and play Uno?’ I could use a cheer-up night.

Kellie scrambles up. ‘Can’t. I am going to Alicia Bernard’s birthday. It’s in the schedule notebook.’

‘Who’s Alicia Bernard?’ I plop down on Kellie’s unmade bed.

‘She’s the new girl. She invited all the girls to our class. Her mom’s making us crepes for breakfast. Do you know what a crepe is?’

‘Yes…’

‘Have you ever had one? I heard they can be salty or sweet.’

‘Yes; I had one with Nutella and strawberries once.’ Josh and Margot and I drove down to Richmond because Margot wanted to go to the Edgar Allan Poe Museum. We ate lunch at a café downtown and that is what I had.

Kellie’s eyes got big and greedy. ‘I hope that’s the kind her mom makes.’

Then she dashes off; I find her pajamas in the laundry room downstairs.

I pick up Kellie’s stuffed pig and cuddle it in my arms. So even my nine-year-old sister has plans on a Friday night. If Margot were here; we would be going to the movies with Josh or stopping by the cocktail hour at the Belleview retirement home. If my dad were home; I could muster up the

courage to take his car or have him drop me off; but- I cannot even do that.

After Kellie gets picked up; I go back to my room and organize my shoe collection. It is a little early in the season to switch out my sandals for my winter shoes, but I go ahead, and do it because I am in the mood. I think about doing my clothes too, but that is no small undertaking. Instead, I sit down and write Margot a letter on stationery my grandma bought me in Korea. It is pale blue with a border of fluffy white lambs. I talk about school, and Kellie's

new teacher, and a lavender skirt I ordered from a Japanese website that I am sure she will want to borrow, but I do not tell her any of the real things.

I miss her so much…

Nothing is the same without her. I am realizing now that the year is going to be a lonely one because I do not have Margot, and Ido not do not have Josh, anit is-it is-s just me alone. I have Chris; but not really. I- I had I had I had-d made more friends. If I had more friend would not would not-t have done something as stupid as kiss

Marcel K. in the hallway and tell he is- he is- he is, my boyfriend.

I WAKE UP TO THE sound of the lawnmower. It is Saturday morning, and I cannot fall back to sleep; so now I am lying in my bed staring at my walls; at all the pictures and things, I have saved. I am thinking I want to shake things up. I am thinking I should paint my room. The only question is what color?

Lavender? Cotton-candy pink? Something bold; like turquoise? Just an accent wall?

One marigold wall; one salmon pink. It is a lot to consider. I should wait for Margot to come home before I make such a weighty decision.

Plus, I have never painted a room before, and Margot has, with Habitat for Humanity. She will know what to do. On Saturdays, we usually have something good for breakfast, like pancakes or frittata with frozen shredded potato and broccoli. But since there is no Kellie and no Margot; I just eat cereal instead.

Whoever heard of making pancakes or frittata for just one person? My dad's been awake for hours; he is outside mowing the lawn. I do not want to get roped into helping him do yard work; so, I make myself busy in the house and clean the downstairs. I Swiffer and Dust-Buster and wipe the tables down, and all the while my wheels are turning about how I am going to get myself out of this Marcel K. situation with even a sliver of dignity. The wheels turn and turn, but no good solutions come to mind.

When Kellie gets dropped off; I am folding laundry. She plops down on the couch on her belly and asks me; ‘What’d you do last night?’

‘Nothing. I just stayed home.’

‘And?’

‘I organized my closet.’ It is humiliating to say that aloud. Hastily I changed the subject. ‘So did Alicia’s mom make sweet crepes or salty ones?’

‘She made both. First, we had ham and cheese and then we had

Nutella. How come we never have any Nutella?'

'I think maybe because hazelnuts make Margot's throat itch.'

'Can we get some next time?'

'Sure;' I say. 'We'll just have to eat the whole jar before Margot comes home.'

'No problem;' Kellie says.

'On a scale of one to ten; how badly do you miss Gogo?' I ask her.

Kellie thinks this over. ‘s six-point five;’ she says at last.

‘Only six point five?’

‘Yeah; I’ve been really busy;’ she says, rolling over and kicking her legs up in the air.

‘I’ve hardly had time to miss Margot. You know; if you got out more; maybe you wouldn’t miss her so much.’

I boomerang a sock at her head and Kellie explodes into a giggle fit. I am tickling her armpits when Daddy

comes in from outside with a stack of mail.

‘Something came back to sender for you; Lara Jean;’ he says, handing me an envelope.

It has my handwriting! I scramble up and snatch it out of his hands. It is my letter to Kenny from camp. It came back to me!

‘Who’s Kenny?’ Daddy wants to know.

‘Just a boy I met at church camp a long time ago;’ I say, tearing the envelope open.

Dear Kenny: It is the last day of camp and the last time I will ever see you because we live so far apart. Remember on the second day; I was scared to do archery and you made a joke about minnows and it was so funny I nearly peed my pants?

I stopped reading. A joke about minnows? How funny would it have been?

I was homesick but you made me feel better. I think I might have left camp early if it had not been for you, Kenny. So, thank you. Also, you are an amazing swimmer and I like your laugh. I wish it had been me you kissed at the bonfire last night and not Blaire H.

Take care, Kenny. Have a good rest of the summer and a good life.

Love: Lara Jean I clutch the letter to my chest.

This is the first love letter I ever wrote. I am glad it came back to me.

Though, I suppose it would not have been so bad if Kenny Donati got to know that he helped two people at camp that summer- the kid who almost drowned in the lake and twelve-year-old- Lara Jean Song Covey.

WHEN MY DAD HAS A Day off; he cooks Korean food. It is not exactly authentic, and sometimes he just goes to the Korean market and buys ready-made side dishes and marinated meat,

but sometimes he will call our grandma for a recipe, and he will try.

That is the thing- Daddy tries. He does not say so, but I know it is because he does not want us to lose our connection to our Korean side, and food is the only way he knows how to contribute. After Mommy died; he used to try to make us have playdates with other Korean kids, but it always felt awkward and forced. Except I did have a crush on Marcel Kim for a minute there. Thank God; the crush never escalated into full-on love; or else I

would have written him a letter too, and that would be just one more person I would have to avoid.

My dad made bossam; which is pork shoulder you slice up and then wrap in lettuce.

He brined it last night in sugar and salt and it has been roasting in the oven all day. Kellie and I keep checking on it; it smells so good.

When it is finally time to eat; my dad has everything laid out on the dining room table so pretty. A silver bowl of butter-lettuce leaves; just

washed; with the water beads still clinging to the surface; a cut-glass bowl of kimchi he bought from Whole

Foods; a little bowl of pepper paste; soy sauce with scallions and ginger.

My dad’s taking arty pictures of the table. ‘I’m sending a pic to Margot so she can see;’ he says.

‘What time is it over there?’ I ask him. It is a cozy day- it is six o’clock, and I am still in my pj’s. I am hugging my knees, sitting in the big dining-room chair with the armrests.

‘It’s eleven. I’m sure she’s still up;’ my dad says, snapping away. ‘Why don’t you invite Josh over? We’re going to need help finishing all this food.’

‘He’s probably busy;’ I say quickly. I still have not figured out what I am going to say to him about me and Marcel; much less me and him.

‘Just try him. He loves Korean food.’ Daddy moves the pork shoulder, so it is more centered. ‘Hurry; before I get cold!’

I pretend to text him on my phone. I feel a tiny bit guilty for lying,

but Daddy would understand if he knew all the facts.

‘I don’t understand why you kids text when you could just call. You’d get an answer right away instead of waiting for one.’

‘You’re so old; Daddy;’ I say. I look down at my phone. ‘Josh can’t come over. Let us just eat. Kellie! Dinner bell!’

‘Coming!’ Kellie screams from upstairs.

‘Well; maybe he’ll come over later and take some leftovers;’ Daddy says.

‘Daddy; Josh has his own life now. Why would he come over when Margot’s not here?

Besides, they’re not even together anymore; remember?’

My dad makes a confused face. ‘What? They’re not?’

I guess Margot did not tell him. Though you would have thought he could have sassed it out for himself

when Josh did not come with us to the airport to drop Margot off.

Why don't dads know anything? Does he not have eyes and ears? 'No; they're not. And by the way; Margot is at college in Scotland. And my name is Lara Jean.'

'All right; all right; your dad is clueless;' Daddy says. 'I get it. No need to rub it in.' He scratches his chin. 'Geez; I could have sworn Margot never mentioned anything.'

Kellie comes crashing into the dining room. 'Yum- yum- yum.' She

slams into her chair and starts spearing pork onto her plate.

‘Kellie; we have to pray first;’ my dad says, settling into his chair.

We only ever pray before we eat when we eat in the dining room, and we only ever eat in the dining room when Daddy cooks Korean or on Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Mommy used to take us to church when we were little, and after she died; Daddy tried to keep it going, but he had Sunday shifts sometimes and it became less and less.

‘Thank you; God; for this food, you have blessed us with. Thank you for my beautiful daughters, and please watch over our Margot. In Jesus’s name, we pray; amen.’

‘Amen;’ we echo.

‘Looks pretty great; right; girls?’ My dad is grinning as he assembles a lettuce leaf with pork, rice, and kimchi. ‘Kellie; you know how to do it; right? It’s like a little taco.’

Kellie nods and copies him.

I make my lettuce-leaf taco and nearly spit it out. The pork is really-really- salty.

So-o salty I could cry. But I keep chewing, and across the table; Kellie's making a horrible face at me; but I give her a shush look. Daddy has not tried his yet; he is taking a picture of his plate.

'So good; Daddy;' I say. 'It tastes like a restaurant.'

'Thanks; Lara Jean. It came out just like the picture. I can't believe how beautiful and crispy the top looks.' My

dad finally takes a bite, and then he frowns. ‘Is this salty to you?’

‘Not really;’ I say.

He takes another bite. ‘This… tastes- salty to me. Kellie: what do you think?’

Kellie’s chugging water. ‘No; it tastes good; Daddy.’

I give her a secret thumbs-up.

‘Hmm; no; it tastes salty.’ He swallows. ‘I followed the recipe exactly - maybe I used the wrong kind of salt for the brine? Lara Jean; taste it again.’

I take a teeny-tiny bite, which I try to hide by putting the lettuce in front of my face.

‘Mm…’

‘Maybe if I cut more from the center -’

My phone buzzes on the table. It is a text from Josh. Was coming back from a run and understood something clearly at last on in the dining room. A normal text as if yesterday never- ever happened.

Korean food??

Josh has some sixth sense of when my dad’s cooking Korean food because he will come sniffing around right when we are sitting down to eat. He loves Korean food.

When my grandma comes to visit; he will not leave her side. He will even watch Korean dramas with her. She cuts him pieces of apple and peels clementine’s for him like he is a baby. My grandma likes boys better than girls.

Now that I think of it; all the women in my family love; Josh.

Except for Mommy, who never got to meet him. But I am sure she would love him too. She would love anyone as good to Margot as Josh is; was to her.

Kellie cranes her neck to look over my shoulder. ‘Is that Josh? Is he coming over?’

‘No!’ I set down my phone and it buzzes again. Can I come over?

‘It says he wants to come over!’

My dad perks up. ‘Tell him to come over! I want to get his opinion on this…’

‘Listen; everyone in this family needs to accept that Josh is no longer a part of it. He and Margot are dunzo;’ I hesitate. Does Kellie still not know? I cannot remember if it is still supposed to be a secret. ‘I mean now that Margot’s at college and they’re long-distance…’

‘I know they've broken up;’ Kellie says, making a lettuce wrap with just rice.

‘Margot told me over video chat.’

Across the table, my dad makes a sad face and stuffs a piece of lettuce in his mouth.

Her mouth full; Kellie continues; ‘I just don’t see why we can’t still be friends with him.

He is all our- friends. Right, Daddy?’

‘Right;’ my dad agrees. ‘And look; relationships are incredibly amorphous.

They could get back together. They could stay with friends. Who is to say what will happen in the future? I say we don’t count Josh out just yet.’

We are finishing dinner when I get another text from Josh. Never mind; it says.

Part- 6

We are stuck eating that salty pork shoulder for the rest of the weekend. The next morning: my dad makes fried rice and cuts the pork into tiny pieces and says to ‘think of it like bacon.’ For dinner, I test that theory by

mixing it with Kraft macaroni and cheese, and I end up throwing out the whole batch because it tastes like slop. ‘If we had a dog;’ Kellie keeps saying. I make a batch of regular macaroni instead.

After dinner, I take Sadie the Sweetheart for a walk. That is what my sisters and I call Sadie; she is a golden retriever that lives down the street. The Shahs are out of town for the night; so, they asked me to feed her and walk her. Normally, Kellie would beg to be the one to do it, but there is some

movie on TV that she has been waiting to see.

Sadie and I are doing the usual route around our cul-de-sac when Josh jogs up to us in his running clothes. Crouching down to pet Sadie; he says, ‘So how are things going?’

Funny you should mention that Josh. Because I have gotten my story locked and loaded.

Marcel and I had a fight via video chat this morning (in case Josh has noticed I have not left the house all weekend), and we broke up, and I am

devastated about the whole thing; because I have been in constant love with Marcel - since the seventh grade; but c’est la vie.

‘Actually; Marcel and I broke up this morning.’ I bite my lip and try to look sad. ‘It’s just; hard; you know? After I liked him for so long and then finally, he likes me back.

But it is just not meant to be. I do not think he is over his breakup yet. Genevieve still has too strong a hold on him; so, there’s no room in his heart for me.’

Josh gives me a funny look. ‘That’s not what he was saying today at McCall's.’

What was Marcel K. doing at a bookstore? He is not the bookstore type.

‘What did he say?’ I try to sound casual, but my heart is pounding so loudly I am sure Sadie can hear it.

Josh keeps petting Sadie.

‘What did he say?’ Now I am just trying not to sound shrill. ‘Like; what was said exactly?’

‘When I was ringing him up; I asked him when you guys started going out, and he said recently. He said he liked you.’

What - I must look as shocked as I feel; because Josh straightens up and says, ‘Yeah; I was kind of surprised too.’

‘You were surprised that he would like me?’

‘Well; kind of. - just isn’t the kind of guy who would date a girl like you.’ When I stare back at him; sour and unsmiling; he quickly tries to

backtrack. ‘I mean; because you’re not; you know-’

‘I’m not what? As pretty as Genevieve?’

‘No! That is not what I am saying. What I am trying to say is; you are like this sweet; innocent girl who likes to be at home with her family, and I don’t know; I guess - doesn’t strike me as someone who would be into that.’

Before he can say another word; I grab my phone out of my jacket pocket and say, ‘That’s Marcel calling me right now; so, he does like homely

girls.’ ‘I didn’t say homely! I said you like to be at home!’

‘Later; Josh.’ I speed walk away, dragging Sadie with me. Into my phone, I say, ‘Oh hey; Marcel.’

IN CHEM, Marcel SITS A row in front of me.

I wrote him a note. Why would you tell Josh that we are- I hesitate and then finish a thing?

I kick the back of his chair, and he turns around and I hand him the note. He slouches in his seat to read it;

then I watch as he scribbles something. He tips back in his chair and drops the note on my desk without looking at me.

A thing?

Ha- ha- ha…

I press down so hard my pencil tip chips off. Please answer the question.

We will talk later.

I let out a frustrated sigh and Matt; my lab partner gave me a funny look.

After class Marcel has swept away all his friends; they leave in a large group. I am packing up my backpack when he returns; alone. He hopes upon the table.

‘So; let us talk;’ he says, super casual.

I clear my throat and try to gather my bearings. ‘Why did you tell Josh we were-’ I almost say-a thing’ again; but then change it to ‘together?’

‘I don’t get what you’re so upset about. I did you a favor. I could have just as easily blown up your spot.’

I pause. He is right. He could have. ‘So why didn’t you?’

‘You’ve sure got a funny way of saying thank you. You’re welcome; by the way.’

Automatically I say, ‘Thank you.’ Wait. Why am I thanking him? ‘I appreciate you letting me kiss you; but-’

‘You’re welcome;’ he says again.

Ugh! He is so insufferable. Just for that, I am going to toss a little dig his way.

‘That was; generous of you. To let me do that. But I have already explained to Josh that it is not going to work out with us because Genevieve has you whipped; so, it is all good. You can stop pretending now.’

Marcel glares at me. ‘I’m not whipped.’

‘But aren’t you; though? I mean; you guys have been together

since the seventh grade. You're her property.'

'You don't know what you're talking about;' Marcel scoffs.

'There was a rumor last year that she made you get a tattoo of her initials on your butt for her birthday.' I pause. 'So- did you?' I reach around him, and fake try to lift the back of his shirt. He yelps and jumps away from me, and I collapse in a fit of- giggles.

'So- you do have a tattoo!'

‘I don’t have a tattoo!’ he yells. ‘And we are not even together anymore; so, can you stop this shit? We broke up. We are over. I’m done with her.’

‘Wait; didn’t she break up with you?’ I ask.

Marcel shoots me a dirty look. ‘It was mutual.’

Hastily I say, ‘Well, I'm sure you’ll get back together soon. You have broken up before; right? Only to get back together again; like immediately. It is probably because you were each

other’s firsts. That is why you cannot let each other go. I’ve heard that’s how it is with firsts; especially with guys.’

Marcel’s mouth drops. ‘How do you know- ‘

‘Oh; everybody knows. You guys did its first year in her parents’ basement; right?’

He gives a grudging nod.

‘See? Even I know, and I am nobody. Even if you do stay broken up for real this time; which I doubt; it’s not like any other girl can date you.’

Meaningfully I say, ‘Let us not forget what happened to Jamila Singh.’

Marcel and Genevieve broke up for a month last year; so, Marcel started dating Jamila Singh. Jamila might even be prettier than Genevieve- a different kind of pretty; anyway.

More like hot. She has long wavy black hair and a little waist and a big butt.

Let us just say it did not end well for her. Not only did Genevieve cut her out of the group; but she told everyone that Jamila’s family had an

Indonesian slave living with them when it was just her cousin. And I am sure it was Genevieve who started a rumor online that Jamila washed her hair only once a month. The final straw was when Jamila's parents got an anonymous e-mail saying that she was having sex with Marcel. Her parents transferred her right out and put her in private school. Genevieve and Marcel were back together by spring formal.

'Gen says she didn't have anything to do with that.'

I gave him a real look. ‘Please; Marcel. I know her well and so do you.

Well, I did know her well. But I do not think people change at the core. They are who they are.’

Slowly Marcel says, ‘That’s right. You two were BFFs back in the day.’

‘We were friends;’ I agree. ‘I wouldn’t call us BFFs; but -’ Wait a minute; why are we talking about me again? ‘Everybody knows it was Genevieve who told Jamila’s parents.

You do not have to be a detective to figure out that Genevieve was jealous of her.

Jamila was the prettiest girl in our grade, next to Genevieve. Gen was always a very jealous person. I remember this one time my dad bought me a … um- you know…'

Marcel's thoughtfully staring at me, and it is suddenly making me nervous.

'What?'

‘Let us just do this for a little while.’

‘Do what?’

‘Let us let people think we’re a couple.’

Wait - what?

‘It’s driving Gen crazy not knowing what’s up with you and me. Why don’t we let her sit with it a little longer? It is perfect. You date me first, and then Gen will get it that we are over. You’ll be breaking the seal.’ He raises an eyebrow at me.

‘Do you even know what breaking the seal means?’

‘Yes; of course; I know what that means.’ I have no idea what that means. I make a mental note to ask Chris the next time I see her.

Marcel comes up close to me, and I scoot backward. He laughs and cocks his head to the side and puts his hands on my shoulders. ‘So then break my seal.’

I let out a nervous laugh. ‘Ha-ha; sorry; Marcel; but I’m not interested. In you.’

‘Well; yes. That is the whole point. I am not interested in you; either. Like at all.’

Marcel shudders. ‘So- what do you say?’

I shrug my shoulders; so, his hands fall away. ‘Hello; I just got through explaining to you how Gen will kill any girl that goes near you!’

Marcel dismisses this. ‘Gen’s all talk. She would never do anything to anybody.

You just don’t know her as I do.’ When I do not say anything; he takes my silence as encouragement, and he says; ‘It would help you out too; you know. With that kid Josh. We are not you so worried about losing face in front of him. This could save you from more humiliation.

Because why? Why- would you be with him when you could be with me? Well, pretend to be with me. Strictly business; though. I can’t have you falling in love with me; too.’

It gives me immense pleasure to look up into his Handsome Boy face and sweetly say; ‘Marcel; I don’t even want to be your pretend girlfriend; much less your real one.’

He blinks. ‘Why not?’

‘You read my letter. You are not my type. Nobody would ever believe I would like you.’

‘It’s up to you. I’m just trying to do us both a favor.’ Then he shrugs and looks over my shoulder like he is bored with this conversation. ‘But Josh believed it.’

In a flash; without even thinking; I say, ‘Okay. Let us do it.’

Hours later; I am lying-in bed that night still marveling about it all. What people will say when they see me walking down the hall with Marcel.

THE NEXT MORNING: Marcel was sitting in the parking lot for me when I got off the bus.

‘Hey;’ he says. ‘Are you seriously taking the bus every day?’

‘My car is being fixed; remember? My accident?’

He sighs like this is somehow offensive to him; me taking the bus to school.

Then he grabs my hand and holds it as we walk into school together.

This is the first time I have walked down the school hallway holding hands with a boy.

It should feel momentous; special, but it does not because it is not real. Honestly, it feels like nothing.

Emily Nussbaum does a double take when she sees us. Emily is Gen’s best friend.

She is staring so hard I am surprised she does not take a quick pic on her phone to send to Gen.

Marcel keeps stopping to say hi to people, and I stand there smiling like it is the most natural thing in the world. Me and Marcel.

At one point I try to let go of his hand because mine is starting to feel sweaty, but he tightens his grip. ‘Your hand is too hot;’ I hissed.

Through clenched teeth, he says, ‘No; your hand is.’

I am sure Genevieve’s hands are never sweaty. She could hold hands for days without getting overheated.

When we get to my locker; we finally drop our hands; so, I can dump my books inside. I am shutting my locker door when Marcel leans in and tries to kiss me on the mouth. I am so startled I turn my head, and we hit foreheads.

‘Ow!’ Marcel rubs his forehead and glares at me.

‘Well; don’t just sneak up on me like that!’ My forehead hurts too. We banged them hard, like cymbals. If I looked up right now; I would see a blue cartoon- birdies.

‘Lower your voice; dummy;’ he says through clenched teeth.

‘Don’t you call me a dummy; you dummy;’ I whisper back.

Marcel heaves a big sigh like he is annoyed with me. I am about to snap at him that it is his fault; not mine when I catch a glimpse of Genevieve gliding down the hallway.

‘Gotta go;’ I say, and I dart off in the opposite direction.

‘Wait!’ Marcel calls out.

But- I keep darting.

I am lying on my bed with my pillow over my face reliving the horrible kiss that-was not. I keep trying to block it out, but it just keeps coming back.

I put my hand to my forehead. I do not think I can do this. It is all so - I mean; the kissing; the sweaty hands; everybody looking. It is too much.

I am just going to have to tell him I changed my mind, and I do not want to do this anymore, and that will be that. I do not have his number, and I do not want to say any of this in an email; either. I will have to go to his house. It is not far; I still remember the way.

I run downstairs; passing Kellie; who is balancing a plate of Oreos and a glass of milk on a tray. ‘I’m borrowing your bike!’ I yell as I fly past her.

‘I’ll be back soon!’

‘You better not let anything happen to it!’ Kellie yells back.

I grab her helmet and the bike and tear out of the yard, pedaling as fast as I can. My knees hit my chest a little; but I am not that much taller than Kellie; so, it is not so bad.

Marcel-

lives two neighborhoods away. It takes me less than twenty minutes to get there.

When I do; there are not any cars in the driveway. Marcel’s not

home. My heart sinks to the pavement. What do I do now? Sit and wait for him on the front porch like stalker? What if his mom comes home first?

I take off my helmet and sit for a minute so I can rest. My hair is damp and sweaty from the ride over, and I am exhausted. I try to run my fingers through my hair; smooth it out. It is a lost cause.

As I am contemplating texting Chris and seeing if she can come to get me; Marcel's car comes roaring down the street and up the driveway. I drop

my phone and then scramble to pick it up.

Marcel climbs out of his car and raises his eyebrows at me. ‘Look who’s here. My adoring girlfriend.’

I stand up and wave at him. ‘Can I talk to you for a minute?’

He slings his backpack over his shoulder and takes his time sauntering over.

He sits down on the front step like a prince on his throne, and I stand in front of him; my helmet in one hand

and my phone in the other. ‘So-o what’s up?’ he drawls. ‘Let me guess. You’re here to back out on me; am I right?’

He is so smug; so sure, of himself. I do not want to give him the satisfaction of being right.

‘I just wanted to go over our game plan with you;’ I say, sitting down. ‘Get our story straight before people start asking questions.’

He raises his eyebrows. ‘Oh. Okay. Makes sense. So how did we get together?’

I clasp my hands in my lap and recite; ‘When I got in that car accident last week, you happened to be driving by, and you waited for Triple-A with me and then you drove me home. You were nervous the whole time because you have had kind of a thing for me since middle school. It was your first kiss. So- this was your big chance-’

‘You were my first kiss?’ he interrupts. ‘How about I was your first kiss. That’s a lot more believable.’

I ignore him and continue. ‘This was your big chance. So- you took it.

You asked me out that very day and we’ve been spending time together ever since and now we’re a couple.’

‘I don’t think Gen’s going to buy this;’ he says, shaking his head.

‘Marcel;’ I say in my most patient voice; ‘the most believable lies are the ones that are at least a little bit true. I did get into a car accident; you did stop and sit with me; we kissed in middle school.’

‘It’s not that.’

‘Then what?’

‘Gen and I hooked up that day after I saw you.’

I sigh… ‘Okay… Spare me the details. My story still works; though. After the car accident, you could not get me out of your mind; so, you asked me out as soon as Genevieve dumped - I mean; as soon as you guys broke up.’ I clear my throat. ‘Since we’re on the topic; I’d also like to set some ground rules.’

‘What kind of ground rules?’ he asks; leaning back.

I press my lips together and take a breath. ‘Well - I don’t want you trying to kiss me again.’

Marcel curls his lip at me. ‘Trust me; I don’t want to do it either. My forehead still hurts from this morning. I have a bruise.’ He pushes his hair off his forehead. ‘Do you see a bruise?’

‘No; but I see a receding hairline.’

‘What?’

Ha… I knew that would get him. Marcel’s so vain. ‘Calm down; I’m only kidding. Do you have a piece of paper and a pen?’ ‘You’re going to write this down?’

Primly I say, ‘It’ll help us remember.’

Rolling his eyes; Marcel reaches into his backpack; pulls out a notebook, and hands it to me. I turn to a clean page and write at the top, Contract. Then I write No kissing.

‘Are people going to buy it if we never touch each other in public?’ Marcel asks, looking skeptical.

‘I don’t think relationships are just about physicality. There are ways to show you care about someone; not just using your lips.’ Marcel’s smiling, and he looks like he is about to crack a joke; so, I swiftly add; ‘Or any other body part.’

He groans. ‘You’ve got to give me something here, Lara Jean. I have a reputation to uphold. None of my friends will believe I suddenly turned

into a monk to date you. How about at least a hand in your back-jean pocket? Trust me; it'll be strictly professional.'

I do not say what I am thinking, which is that he cares way too much what people think about him. I just nod and write down; Marcel is allowed to put a hand in Lara Jean's back jean pocket.

'But no more kissing;' I say, keeping my head down so he cannot see me blush.

'You're the one who started it;' he reminds me. 'And also; I don't have

any STDs; so, you can get that out of your head.'

'I don't think you have any STDs.' I look back up at him. 'The thing is - I've never had a boyfriend before. I have never been on a real date before or held hands walking down the hallway. This is all new for me; so, I am sorry about the forehead thing this morning. I just - wish all of these firsts were happening for real and not with you.'

Marcel seems to be thinking this over. He says, ‘Huh. Okay. Let us just save some stuff; then.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Sure... We’ll save some stuff for you to do when it’s the real thing and not for show.’

I am touched. Who knew Marcel could be so thoughtful and generous?

Like I will not pay for stuff. I’ll save that for a guy who really likes you.’

My smile fades. ‘I wasn’t expecting you to pay for anything!’

Marcel’s doing well. ‘And I won’t walk you to class or buy you flowers.’

‘I get the picture.’ It seems to me like Marcel’s less concerned about me and more concerned about his wallet. He sure is cheap. ‘So; when you were with Genevieve; what kinds of things did she like you to do?’

I am afraid he is going to take this opportunity to make a joke; but instead; he stares off into space and

says, ‘She was always bitching at me to write her notes.’

‘Notes?’

‘Yeah; at school. I did not get why I could not just text her. It is immediate; it is efficient.

Why not use the technology that’s available to us?’

This I understand perfectly. Genevieve did not want notes. She wanted letters.

Real letters were written in his handwriting on actual paper that she

could hold, keep, and read whenever the mood struck her. They were proof; solid and tangible; that someone was thinking about her.

'I'll write you a note a day;' Marcel says suddenly; with gusto. 'That'll drive her ass crazy.'

I write down; Marcel will write Lara Jean one note- every day.

Marcel leans in. 'Write down what you have to go to some parties with me.

And write down no romcoms.'

‘Who said anything about romcoms? Not every girl wants to watch romcoms.’

‘I can just tell that you’re the kind of girl who does.’

I am annoyed that he has this perception of me, and even more annoyed that he is right.

I write, NO DUMB ACTION MOVIES.

‘Then what does that leave us with?’ Marcel demands.

‘Superhero movies; horror movies; period films; documentaries; foreign films-’

Marcel makes a face; grabs the pen and paper from me and writes down; NO FOREIGN FILMS. He also writes; Lara Jean will make Marcel’s picture her phone wallpaper. ‘And vice versa!’ I speak. I point my phone at him. ‘Smile.’

Marcel smiles, and ugh; it is annoying how handsome he is. Then he reaches for his phone, and I stop him. ‘Not right now. My hair looks sweaty

and gross.' 'Good point;' he says, and I want to punch him.

'Can you also write down that under no circumstances can either of us tell anyone the truth?' I ask him.

'The first rule of Fight Club;' Marcel says knowingly.

'I've never seen that movie.'

'Of course; you have not;' he says, and I make a face at him. Also- mental note; watch Fight Club.

Marcel writes it down, and then I sit next to him and take the pen

and underline ‘under no circumstances’ twice. ‘What about an end date?’ I ask suddenly.

‘What do you mean…?’

‘I mean; how long are we going to do this for? Like two weeks? A month…?’

Marcel shrugs. ‘For as long as we feel it.’

‘But- don’t you think we should have something set-’

He cuts me off. ‘You need to relax, Lara Jean. Life does not have to

be so planned. Just roll with it and let it happen.'

I sigh and say, 'Words of wisdom from the great -;' and Marcel wiggles his eyebrows at me. 'Just as long as it's over by the time my sister comes back for Christmas break. She can always tell when I'm lying.'

'Oh; we'll be done by then;' he says.

'Good;' I say, and then I sign the paper, and so does he, and we have our contract.

I am too proud to ask for a ride, and Marcel does not offer; so, I put my helmet back on and ride Kellie’s bike back home. I am halfway there when I realize we never exchanged phone numbers. I do not even know my own boyfriend’s phone number.

I am AT McCall's BOOKSTORE, PICKING up a copy of The Glass Menagerie for English and scanning the store for Josh. Now that Marcel and I have everything worked out; I can triumphantly crow all about it. That will

show him for thinking I am just a homebody no boy would want to date.

I spot him setting up a display of new books in the nonfiction section. He does not see me; so, I sneak up behind and yell; ‘Boo!’

He jumps and drops a book on the floor. ‘You scared the crap out of me!’

‘That was the point; Joshy!’ I am having a giggle fit. The look on his face! I wonder; why is it so deliciously funny to sneak up on people?

‘All right; all right. Quit laughing. What are you here for?’

I hold up my book and wave it in his face. ‘I have Mr. Radnor for English. You had him; right?’

‘Yeah; he’s good. He is strict but fair. I still have my notes if you want them.’

‘Thanks;’ I say. Brightly I add; ‘So guess what. Marcel and I have not broken up.

It was just a misunderstanding.’

‘Oh yes…?’ Josh starts stacking books into a column.

‘Mm-hmm. I saw him yesterday and we talked and talked, for hours. I feel like I could talk to him about anything; you know? He just really gets me.’

Josh’s forehead wrinkles. ‘What do you guys talk about?’

‘Oh; everything. Movies; books; the usual stuff.’

‘Huh. I never saw him as the reading type.’ He squints and looks over my shoulder.

‘Hey; I’ve got to go help Janice out at the counter. When you are ready to check out; come to my register so I can give you, my discount.’

Hmm; this is not exactly the reaction I was hoping for. I barely even got a chance to grow. ‘Sounds good;’ I say, but he is already walking away.

I hug my book to my chest. Now that Josh knows I am not in love with him anymore and I am with

Marcel; I guess everything will slide right back into place and be normal again.

Like my letter never- ever happened.

‘MARGOT CALLED WHEN YOU were out today;’ my dad says over dinner.

Dinner is just salad. Salad for me and Daddy and cereal for Kellie. There were supposed to be chicken breasts, but I forgot to take them out of the freezer this morning; so, there’s just lettuce and carrots with balsamic

dressing. Daddy's supplementing him with two boiled eggs, and I have a piece of buttered toast. Some dinner. Cereal and lettuce. I need to get to the grocery store.

Since Margot left; I have only spoken to her twice, and once was over video chat with all of us crowded around my laptop. I did not get to ask her about the good stuff- authentic; all the adventures she has been going on and the people she has been meeting.

I heard that British people drink absinthe at pubs. I wonder if she

is tried it by now. I have emailed Margot so many times and have only gotten back one email in return so far.

I understand that she is busy, but the least she can do is email back once a day. For all she knows; I could be dead in a ditch. ‘What did she say?’ I ask as I cut my carrot into tiny pieces.

‘She’s thinking about trying out for the shinty club team;’ my dad says, wiping salad dressing off his chin.

‘What’s shinty?’ Kellie asks me, and I shrug.

‘It’s a Scottish sport that’s like field hockey;’ Daddy explains. ‘It started out as a safe swordfight practice in medieval Scotland.’

Boring. Before Daddy can get started on telling us more about medieval Scotland; I say, ‘Let us send Gogo a care package! The stuff she can’t get over there.’ ‘Yeah!’ Kellie cheers.

‘What should we send?’ I ask. ‘I say we all contribute something.’

Daddy chews and taps his finger to his chin. ‘I’ll send gummy

vitamins;' he says. 'And Advil. She only took a small bottle of Advil, and you know how she gets migraines sometimes.'

'I approve.' I point my fork at Kellie. 'And what about you?'

'I've got something I could send;' Kellie says. 'Should I get it?'

Daddy and I look at each other and shrug. 'Sure.'

Kellie comes running back with a picture she is drawn of Margot.

Petting a dog. The exact breed of dog Kellie wants. Akita. I must laugh.

Kellie frowns. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘Nothing;’ I say.

‘Do you think it’s good enough?’ Kellie asks me. ‘Good enough to hang up on her wall?’

‘Definitely;’ I say.

‘No; I want you to look at it;’ she says. ‘Critique it. I can always do better.

Margot won’t want it if it’s not my best work.’

‘Kellie; its is’ I say. ‘Why would I lie?’

She sighs. ‘I just don’t know if it’s finished yet.’

‘Only the artist knows;’ Daddy says with a sage nod.

‘What do you think about the dog?’ she asks him. ‘Isn’t it cute?’

Daddy takes the picture from me and looks at it closely. ‘Yes; the dog is undeniably a good-looking dog.’

‘I’m Asian too;’ she says. Kellie sits back down and takes a bite of cereal and tries not to smile. She is doing her inception thing. Planting positive associations about dogs in Daddy’s head. The kid never rests. She always has an angle.

‘What else is going in the care package?’ Kellie wants to know.

I start ticking off with my fingers. ‘Tampons because I don’t know if they have our brand in Scotland; flannel pj’s; thick socks; Girl Scout cookies-’

‘Where are we going to get Girl Scout cookies this time of year?’ Daddy asks.

‘I have a box of Thin Mints hidden in the freezer;’ I say.

He gives me a hurt look. ‘Hidden from who?’

Thin Mints are his favorite. If there are Thin Mints in the house; forget about it. Daddy is a Thin Mint Monster.

I give an enigmatic shrug. ‘Also- I’m sending Margot’s favorite

kind of roller-ball pen, and - I think that's it.'

'Don't forget her brown boots;' my dad reminds me. 'She specifically requested we send her brown boots with the laces.'

'Did she?' I was hoping Margot had not noticed she had left them behind.

'When did she say that?'

'She emailed me yesterday.'

'I'll see if I can find them.'

My dad says, ‘weren’t you wearing them this weekend?’ and at the same time; Kellie says, ‘They’re in your closet.’

I throw up my hands. ‘All right; all right!’

‘If you get the box together tonight; I can drop it off at the post office tomorrow morning on my way to work;’ Daddy offers.

I shake my head. ‘I want to send the scarf I’ve been knitting, and it won’t be ready in time. Maybe in another week or two?’

Slurping her milk; Kellie waves a hand at me and advises; ‘Just give up on the scarf already. Knitting isn’t your thing.’

I open my mouth to argue and then close it. She is right. If we wait for my scarf to be done to send the care package; Margot will be out of college already. ‘All right;’ I say. ‘We’ll send the care package sans scarf. I am not saying I am giving up on knitting; though. I’ll keep chugging along on it and have it ready for you for your

Christmas gift; Kellie.’ I smile at her sweetly. ‘It’s pink. You're favorite.’

Kellie’s eyes go wide with horror. ‘Or Margot. You could also give it to Margot.’

Kellie slides a piece of paper under my door that night. It is her Christmas list. It is only September- Christmas is still months away! ‘Puppy’ is written at the top in capital block letters. She also wants an ant farm and a skateboard and a TV in her room. Yes, that

The TV's not going to happen. I could buy her an ant farm; though. Or I could talk to Daddy about the puppy. She has not said so, but she misses Margot a lot. In a way, Margot is the only mother she is known. It must be hard for Kellie to have her so far away.

I will just have to remind myself to be more patient with her; more attentive. She needs me now.

I go to her room and climb into her bed. She is just turned the lights off but is already halfway to sleep. 'What if we got a kitten?' I whisper...

Her eyes fly open. ‘No way in heck!’

‘Don’t you think we’re more of a kitten family?’ Dreamily I say, ‘A fluffy gray-and-white kitten with a bushy tail. We could name him Prince if it is a boy. Ooh; or Gandalf the Gray! Wouldn’t that be cute? Or if it is a girl, Agatha. Or Tilly. Or Boss. It depends on her personality.’

‘Quit it;’ Kellie warns. ‘We’re not getting a cat. Cats are blah. They’re also very manipulative.’

Impressed; I say, ‘Where’d you learn that word?’

‘TV!’

‘A puppy is a lot of work. Who is going to feed him, walk him, and house-train him?’

‘I’ll do it. I will do it all. I’m responsible enough to take care of it on my own.’

I snuggle closer to her. I love the way Kellie’s head smells after she has had a bath. ‘Ha! You do not even do the dishes ever. And you never clean

your room. And when have you ever helped fold laundry even once in your life? I mean; really; if you don't do any of those things; how can you be responsible for another living creature?'

Kellie shoves me off. 'Then I'll help more!'

'I'll believe it when I see it.'

'If I help out more; will you help me convince Daddy about the puppy?'

‘If you help out more;’ I agree. ‘If you can prove to me; you’re not a baby anymore.’

Kellie will be ten in January. That is old enough to help around the house.

Margot babies her too much; I think. ‘I’m putting you in charge of emptying the upstairs trash cans once a week. And helping with the laundry.’

‘So - would I get a raise in my allowance?’

‘No. The incentive is me helping you convince Daddy to get a dog, and you not being so babyish anymore.’ I fluff up my pillow. ‘By the way; I’m sleeping in here tonight.’

Kellie gives me a swift kick and I almost fall out of the bed. ‘You’re the babyish one; not me; Lara Jean.’

‘Just let me sleep in here one night!’

‘You take up all the covers.’

Kellie tries to kick me again, but I make my body heavy and pretend I am already asleep.

Soon we both fall asleep for real.

Sunday night I am doing my homework in bed when I get a call from a number I do not recognize. ‘Hello?’

‘Hey. What are you doing?’

‘Um - sorry; but who’s this?’

‘It’s Marcel!’

‘Oh. How did you get my number?’

‘Don’t worry about it.’

There is a longish silence. It is agonizing; every millisecond that ticks by with neither of us talking; but I do not know what to say. ‘So; what did you want?’

Marcel laughs. ‘You so ask, Covey. Your cars in the shop; right? So how about I pick you up from school?’
‘Okay.’

‘Seven-thirty.’

‘Okay.’

‘Okay-’

‘Bye;’ I say, and I hang up.

THE NEXT MORNING: I WAKE Kellie up early; so, she can braid my hair.

‘Save me alone;’ she says, rolling on to her other side. ‘I’m sleeping.’

‘Please; please; please can I get a braid crown?’ I ask her, squatting in front of her bed.

‘No. You can have a side braid and that’s it.’

Swiftly Kellie braids my braid, and then she falls right back to sleep, and I am on my way to figure out clothes. Now that Marcel and I are official; people will be noticing me more; so, I should wear something good. I try on a polka-dot puffy-sleeved dress with tights; but- it does not look right. Neither does my favorite heart sweater with the little pom-poms.

Everything looks so kiddish suddenly. I finally settled on a floral baby-doll dress I ordered off a Japanese

street fashion site, with ankle boots. Sort of a seventies London look.

When I run downstairs at seven twenty-five; Kellie is sitting at the kitchen table with her jean jacket waiting for me. ‘Why are you downstairs already?’ I ask her. Her bus does not come until eight.

‘I have my field trip today; so, I have to go to school early. Remember?’

I run and look at the calendar on the refrigerator. There it is in my handwriting- Kellie’s Field Trip. Shoot.

I was supposed to drive her, but that was before my car accident. Daddy had an overnight shift at the hospital, and he is not home yet; so, I do not have a car.

'Can one of the Cool moms come to get you?'

'It's too late. The bus leaves at seven forty.' Kellie's face is getting splotchy, and her chin is starting to quiver. 'I can't miss the bus; Lara Jean!'

'Okay; okay. Do not get upset. I have a ride coming for us right now.

Don’t worry; okay?’ I pluck a greenish banana from the banana hammock.

‘Let us go- outside and wait for him.’

‘Who?’

‘Just hurry.’

Kellie and I are waiting on the front steps sharing the greenish banana. We both prefer an unripe; greenish banana to a brown speckled one. It is Margot who likes the speckled ones. I will try to save them for banana bread, but Margot gobbles them up;

mushy bruised parts and all. I shudder to even think of it.

There is a chill in the air; even though it is still September and therefore still summer. Kellie rubs her legs to keep warm. She says she will wear shorts in October; that is her plan.

It is past seven-thirty now and no Marcel yet. I am starting to get nervous, but I do not want Kellie to worry. I decided that if he is not here in exactly two minutes; I will go next door

to Josh’s and ask him to run Kellie over to the school.

Across the street, our neighbor Ms. Rossinchild waves at us as she locks her front door; a big coffee thermos in her hand. She dashes toward her car.

‘Good morning; Ms. Rossinchild;’ we chorus. I elbow Kellie and say, ‘Five; four; three-’

‘Damn it!’ Ms. Rossinchild shrieks. Ms. Rossinchild has spilled coffee on her hand. She does this at least twice a week. I do not know why

she does not just slow down or just put the top of the thermos or not fill it up so high.

Just then Marcel drives up, and his black Audi is even shinier in the daylight. I get up and say, ‘Come on Kellie;’ and she trails behind me.

‘Who’s that?’ I hear her whisper.

His windows are down. I come up close to the passenger side and stick my head in.

‘Is it okay if we drop my little sister off at the elementary school?’ I ask.

‘She has to be there early today for a field trip.’

Marcel looks annoyed. ‘Why didn’t you mention it yesterday?’

‘I didn’t know about it yesterday!’ Behind me, I can feel rather than hear Kellie fidgeting.

‘This is a two-seater;’ Marcel says as if I cannot see with my own two eyes.

‘I know that. I’ll just put Kellie in my lap and the seat belt over us.’ Which my dad would kill me for if he knew; but I am not telling, and neither will Kellie.

‘Yeah; because that sounds safe.’ He is being sarcastic. I hate it when people are sarcastic. It is so cheap.

‘It’s two miles!’

He sighs. ‘Fine. Get in.’

I open the door and slide in, laying my bag at my feet. ‘Come on;

Kellie.’ I make space for her between my legs, and she climbs in. I strap us in tight; my arms around her.

‘Don’t tell Daddy;’ I say.

‘Duh;’ she says.

‘Hey. What’s your name?’ Marcel asks her.

Kellie hesitates. Increasingly this happens. With new people, she must decide if she will be Kellie or Katherine.

‘Katherine.’

‘But everyone calls you Kellie?’

‘Everyone who knows me;’ Kellie says. ‘You can call me Katherine.’

Marcel’s eyes light up. ‘You’re tough;’ he says admiringly; which Kellie ignores, but she keeps sneaking peeks at him. He has that effect on people. On girls. Women; even.

We drive through the neighborhood in silence. At last, Kellie says, ‘So who are you?’

I look over at him and he is looking straight ahead. ‘I’m Marcel. Your sister’s; um; boyfriend.’

My mouth drops. We never said anything about lying to our families! I thought this was going to be an at-school-only thing.

Kellie goes completely still in my arms. Then she twists around to look at me and shrieks; ‘He’s your boyfriend? Since when?’

‘Since last week.’ At least that much is the truth. Sort of.

‘But you never said anything! Not one frigging word; Lara Jean!’

Automatically I say, ‘Don’t say ‘frig.’

‘Not one frigging word;’ Kellie repeats with a shake of her head.

Marcel cracks up, and I give him a dirty look. ‘It all happened fast;’ he offers.

‘There was barely time to tell anybody-’

‘Was I talking to you?’ Kellie snaps. ‘No; I don’t think so. I was talking to my sister.’

Marcel’s eyes widen, and I can see him trying to keep a straight face.

‘Does Margot know?’ she asked me.

‘Not yet, and don’t you go mentioning it to her before I have a chance to.’

‘Hmph.’ This appeases Kellie a tiny bit. Knowing something first; before Margot is important.

Then we are at the elementary school and thank God; the bus is still there in the parking lot. All the kids are lined up in front of it. I let out the breath I have been holding the whole way over, and Kellie is already untangling herself from me and bounding out of the car. ‘Have an enjoyable time on the field trip!’ I called out.

She spins back around and points an accusing finger at me. ‘I want to hear the whole story when I get

home!’ With that decree, she is off running for the bus loop.

I re-buckle my seat belt. ‘Um; I don’t remember us deciding to tell our families that we’re boyfriend-girlfriend.’

‘She was going to have to find out at some point; with me chauffeuring you and her around town.’

‘You didn’t have to say ‘boyfriend.’ You could have just said ‘friend.’

We are getting close to school now; just two more lights. I give my side braid a nervous tug.

‘Um; so, have you talked to Genevieve at all?’

Marcel frowns. ‘No.’

‘She hasn’t said a word to you about it?’

‘Nope. But I’m sure she will soon.’

Marcel speeds into the parking lot and zooms into space. When we get out of the car and head for the

entrance, Marcel’s fingers lace through mine. He is going to drop me off at my locker as he did before, but he leads us in the opposite direction.

‘Where are we going?’ I ask him.

‘Cafeteria…’

I’m about to protest, but before I can; he says firmly; ‘We need to start hanging out in public more. The caf- is where we’ll get the most bang for our buck.’

Josh will not be in the cafeteria- that is for popular people- but I know who will most certainly be there- Genevieve.

When we walk in; she is holding court at their lunch table- her and Emily Nussbaum- and Gabe and Darrell from the lacrosse team. They are all eating breakfast and drinking coffee. She must have a sixth sense where Marcel is concerned because she beams lasers at us immediately. I start slowing down, which Marcel does not seem to notice.

Marcel makes a beeline for the table, but at the last second; I chicken out. I tug on his hand and say, ‘Let us sit over here;’ and point to an empty table in their line of vision.

‘Why…?’

‘Just- please.’ I think fast. ‘Because you see; it would be too blatantly jerky of you to- bring a girl to the table after you’ve only been broken up for; like; a minute. And this way Genevieve can watch from afar and wonder for just a little bit longer.’ And I am terrified.

As I drag Marcel over to the table; he waves to his friends; shrugging his shoulders like- Wha-d-d-are-you-going to do? I sit down, and Marcel sits down next to me. He pulls my chair closer to his. Raising his eyebrows; he asks; ‘Are you that afraid of her?’ ‘No.’ Yes.

‘You’re going to have to face her sometime.’ Marcel leans forward and grabs my hand again and starts tracing the lines on my palm.

‘Quit;’ I say. ‘You’re creeping me out.’

He flashes me a hurt look. ‘Girls love it when I do that.’

‘No; Genevieve loves it. Or she pretends to love it. You know; now that I think of it; you do not have that much experience when it comes to girls. Just one girl.’ I take my hand away from his and perch it on the table. ‘I mean; everybody thinks you’re this big heartbreaker when you’ve only ever been with Genevieve and then Jamila for like a month-’

‘Okay; okay. I get it. Enough already. They’re watching us.’

‘Who is? Your table?’

Marcel shrugs. ‘Everyone...’

I did a quick look around. He is right. Everyone is watching us. Marcel’s so used to people watching him, but I am not. It feels funny; like a new sweater that makes my skin feel itchy. Because no one ever watches me. It is like being on stage. And the funny thing; the strange thing is it is not an altogether unpleasant feeling.

I am pondering this when my eyes meet Genevieve’s. There is this very moment of recognition between us

like I know you. Then she looks away and whispers something to Emily.

Genevieve is looking at me like I am a tasty morsel, and she is going to eat me alive and then spit out my bones. And then; just as quickly; the look is gone, and she is smiling.

I shiver. The truth is Genevieve scared me even when we were kids. One time I was playing at her house, and Margot called looking for me to come home for lunch, and Genevieve told her I was not there. She would not let me leave because she wanted to

keep playing dollhouse. She kept blocking the door. I had to call her mom.

The clock reads five minutes past eight. The bell's going to ring soon. 'We should get going;' I say, and when I stand up; my knees feel shaky. 'Ready?'

He is distracted because he was looking over at his table of friends. 'Yeah; sure.' Marcel gets up and propels me toward the door; he keeps one hand on the small of my back.

With his other hand, he waves at his friends. ‘Smile;’ he whispers to me; so, I do.

I must admit; it is not a bad feeling; having a boy sweep you along; usher you through crowds. It is the feeling of being cared for. It is like walking in a dream. I am still me and Marcel’s still Marcel, but everything around me feels fuzzy and unreal; like the time Margot and I snuck champagne on New Year’s Eve.

I never knew it before, but I think all this time I have been invisible.

Just someone who was there. Now that people think I'm Marcel -'s girlfriend; they're wondering about me. Like why? What about me made Marcel like me? What do I have? What makes me so special? I would be wondering too.

I am now a Mysterious Girl. Before I was just a Quiet Girl. But becoming Marcel's girlfriend has elevated me to Mysterious Girl.

I take the bus home from school because Marcel must go to lacrosse practice. I sit in the front the

way I have been doing, but today people have questions for me.

Undergraduates: mostly, because hardly any upper-class students take the bus.

‘What’s with you and-?’ A sophomore girl named Manda asks me.

I pretend like I do not hear her.

Instead, I sink lower into my seat and open the note Marcel left for me in my locker.

Dear Lara Jean.

Excellent job today.

Marcel-

I start to smile and then I hear Manda whisper to her friend; ‘It’s so weird that - would like her. I mean - look at her and then look at Genevieve.’ I can feel myself shrink. Is that what everyone thinks? It is not that I am a Mysterious Girl.

It is that I am a Not Good Enough Girl.

When I get home; I go straight to my room; put on a soft nightgown

and release my braid. It is a sweet relief to let it out. My scalp is tingling with gratitude. Then I lie in my bed and stare out the window until it gets dark. My phone keeps buzzing, and I am sure it is Chris, but I do not lift my head to look.

Kellie barges in at one point and says, ‘Are you sick? Why are you still lying-in bed like you have cancer like Brielle’s mom did?’

‘I need peace;’ I say, closing my eyes. ‘I need to replenish myself with peace.’

‘Well - then what are we eating for dinner?’

I open my eyes. That is right. It is Monday. I oversee dinner on Mondays now.

Ugh; Margot, where are you? It is dark already; there’s not enough time to defrost anything. Mondays should be pizza nights. I eye her. ‘Do you have any money?’

We both get an allowance- Kellie gets five dollars a week and I get twenty, but Kellie always has more money than me. She saves everything

like a wily squirrel. I do not know where she keeps it because she locks the door whenever she goes to take any out of her stash.

-And-

She will lend it, but she charges interest. Margot has a credit card that she is allowed to use for groceries and gas, but she took that with her. I should ask Daddy about getting me one too; now that I am the oldest sister.

‘Why do you need money?’

‘Because I want to order a pizza for dinner.’ Kellie opens her mouth to negotiate; but before she can get a word in; I say, ‘Daddy will pay you back when he gets home; so, don’t even think about charging me interest. The pizzas for you; too; you know. Twenty oughts' to do it.’

Kellie crosses her arms. ‘I’ll give you the money, but first; you have to tell me about that boy from this morning. Your boyfriend.’

I groan. ‘What do you want to know?’

‘I want to know how you got together.’

‘We used to be friends back in middle school; remember? We would all hang out in the Pearce's’ treehouse sometimes.’ Kellie gives me a blank shrug. ‘Well; remember that day I got in a car accident?’ Kellie nods. ‘Well; Marcel was driving by, and he stopped and helped me. And we just - reconnected. It was fate.’ This is good practice, telling Kellie this story. I will tell Chris the same story tonight.

‘That’s it? That’s the whole story?’

‘Hey; that’s a fairly delightful story;’ I say. ‘I mean; a car accident is overly dramatic; plus, our history together.’

Kellie just says; ‘Hmm;’ and she leaves it at that.

We have sausage and mushroom pizza for dinner, and when I broach the idea of Pizza Mondays; Daddy is quick to agree. He is remembering my mac and cheese.

It is a relief that Kellie spends most of dinner talking about her field trip and all I must do is chew on my pizza. I am still thinking about what Manda said and wondering if this was not such a clever idea.

When Kellie pauses to inhale her slice; Daddy turns to me and says, ‘Did anything interesting happen to you today?’

I swallow my mouthful of pizza. ‘Um - not really.’

Later that night I fix myself a bubble bath and soak in the tub for so

long Kellie bangs on the door twice to check if I have fallen asleep. Once I did.

I have just drifted off when my phone buzzes. It is Chris. I hit ignore, but then it keeps buzzing, and buzzing, and buzzing. I finally just picked it up.

‘Is it true?’ She screams.

I hold the phone away from my ear. ‘Yes.’

‘Oh my god. Tell me everything.’

‘Tomorrow; Chris. I will tell you everything tomorrow. Good night.’

‘Wait-’

‘Night!’

THAT FRIDAY I GO TO my first ever football game. I have never had even the tiniest bit of interest in it before, and I still do not. I am sitting high in the stands with Marcel and his friends, and as far as I can tell; there is not a lot to see. It just seems like a lot of waiting and huddling and not a lot of action. Nothing at all like football games in the movies and on TV shows.

By nine-thirty the game’s over; I hope, and I am yawning into my coat

when Marcel suddenly throws his arm around me. I nearly choke on my yawn.

Down below, Genevieve is cheering with the rest of the squad. She is shimmying and shaking her pom-poms. She looks up in the stands, and when she sees us; she stops for just a half-second before launching into a new cheer; eyes blazing.

I glance at Marcel, who has a satisfied smirk on. When Genevieve's back on the sidelines; he drops his arm and suddenly seems to remember I am

there. He says, ‘Eli’s having people over tonight. Want to go?’

I do not even know who Eli is. I yawn again; a big one for the show. ‘Um - I’m really tired. So - no. No; thank you. Can you just drop me off on the way there?’

Marcel gives me a look, but he does not argue.

On the way home, we pass by the diner and Marcel suddenly says; ‘I’m hungry. Do you want to stop and get something?’ Pointedly he adds; ‘Or are you too tired?’

I ignore the dig and say, ‘Sure; I can eat.’

So, Marcel turns the car around and we go to the diner. We get a booth up front.

Whenever I used to come here with Margot and Josh; we would always sit in the back near the jukebox; so, we could put coins in. Half the time the jukebox was broken, but we still liked sitting near it. It is weird to be here without them. We have so many traditions here.

The three of us would get two grilled-cheese sandwiches and cut them up into squares, and we would order a bowl of tomato soup to dip the squares in, and then Josh and I would share a waffle with extra whipped cream for dessert and Margot would have a bowl of tapioca pudding. Gross; I know. I am sure only grandmas like tapioca pudding.

Our server is Kelly, who is a student at the college. She was gone all summer, and now she is back. She eyes Marcel as she sets down our waters.

‘Where are your friends tonight?’ she asked me.

I say, ‘Margot’s left for Scotland, and Josh - isn’t here.’ Which Marcel rolls his eyes at.

Then Marcel orders blueberry pancakes and bacon and scrambled eggs. I get grilled cheese with fries on the side and a black cherry soda.

When Kelly leaves to put in our orders; I ask him; ‘Why do you hate Josh so much?’

‘I don’t hate him;’ Marcel scoffs. ‘I barely know the guy.’

‘Well; you certainly don’t like him.’

Marcel scowls at me. ‘What’s to like? That kid turned me in once for cheating in seventh grade.’

Did Marcel cheat? My stomach twists a little. ‘What kind of cheating was it? Like homework?’

‘No; a Spanish test. I wrote down the answers in my calculator, and Josh freaking told me. Who does that?’

I search his face for some sign of embarrassment or shame at having cheated, but I do not see even an iota. ‘What are you so high and mighty for? You’re the one who cheated!’

‘It was seventh grade!’

‘Well; do you still cheat?’

‘No. Hardly ever. I mean; I have.’ He frowns at me. ‘Would you quit looking at me like that?’

‘Like what?’

‘With judged eyes. Look; I’m going to school on a lacrosse

scholarship anyway; so, what does it matter?'

I have a sudden revelation. I lower my voice and say, 'Wait - can you read?'

He bursts out laughing. 'Yes; I can read! Geez; Lara Jean. Not everything has a story behind it; okay? I'm just lazy.' He snorts. 'Can I read it? I have written you multiple notes! You're hilarious.'

I can feel my face get flushed. 'It wasn't that funny.' I squint at him. 'Is everything a joke to you?'

‘Not everything; but most things; sure.’

I drop my chin. ‘Then maybe that’s a character flaw that you should work on;’ I say.

‘Because some things are serious, and they should be taken seriously. Sorry if you think that’s me being judged.’

‘Yup; that’s judged. You are judged in general. That is a character flaw that you should work on. You need to learn how to kick back and have fun.’

I am listing off all the ways I have fun- biking (which I hate;) baking; reading; I consider saying knitting, but I am sure he will only make fun of me- when Kelly drops off our food and I stop so I can bite into my grilled cheese while it is still oozy.

Marcel steals one of my French fries. ‘So- who else?’ ‘Who else what?’ With his mouth full, he says, ‘Who else got letters?’

‘Um; that’s private.’ I shake my head at him; like Wow; how rude.

‘What? I’m simply curious.’ Marcel dips another fry into my little ramekin of ketchup.

Smirking: he says, ‘Come on; don’t be shy. You can tell me. I know I am number one. But I want to hear who else cut it.’

He is practically flexing; he is so sure of himself. Fine; if he wants to know so bad; I will tell him. ‘Josh; you- ‘

‘Obviously…’

‘Kenny…’

Marcel snorts. ‘Kenny? Who’s he?’

I prop my elbows up on the table and rest my chin on my hands. ‘A boy I met at church camp. He was the best swimmer on the whole boys’ side. He saved a drowning kid once. He swam out to the middle of the lake before the lifeguards even noticed anything was wrong.’

‘So- what’d he says- when he got the letter?’

‘Nothing. It was sent back to the sender.’

‘Okay; who’s next?’

I take a bite of a sandwich. ‘Lucas Krapf.’

‘He’s gay;’ Marcel says.

‘He’s not gay!’

‘Dude quit dreaming. The kid is gay. He wore an ascot to school yesterday.’

‘I’m sure he was wearing it ironically. Besides, wearing an ascot doesn’t make someone gay.’ I give him a look like Wow; so homophobic.

‘Hey; don’t give me that look;’ the objects. ‘My favorite uncle’s gay as hell.

I bet you fifty bucks that if I showed my uncle Eddie a picture of Lucas; he’d confirm it in half a second.’

‘Just because Lucas appreciates fashion; that doesn’t make him gay.’

Marcel opens his mouth to argue but I lift a hand to quiet him. ‘All it means is he’s more of a city guy amid all this-this boring suburbia. I bet you he ends up going to NYU or some other

place in New York. He could be a TV actor. He has that look; you know. Svelte with fine-boned features. Overly sensitive features. He looks like - like an angel.'

'So- what did Angel Boy say about the letter; then?'

'Nothing - I'm sure because he's a gentleman and didn't want to embarrass me by bringing it up.' I give him a meaningful look. Unlike some people, this is what I am saying with my eyes.

Marcel rolls his eyes. ‘All right; all right. Whatever; I don’t care.’ He leans back in his seat and stretches his arm out on the back of the empty seat next to him.

‘That’s only four. Who’s the fifth?’

I am surprised he has been keeping count. ‘John Ambrose McClaren.’

Marcel’s eyes widened. ‘McClaren? When did you like him?’

‘Eighth grade.’

‘I thought you liked me in eighth grade!’

‘There may have been a little bit of overlap;’ I admit. Stirring my straw; I say, ‘There was this one time; in the gym - he and I had to pick up all the soccer balls, and it started to rain -’ I sigh. ‘It was probably the most romantic thing that ever happened to me.’

‘What is it with girls and rain?’ Marcel wanders.

‘I don’t know - I guess maybe because everything feels more dramatic in the rain;’ I say with a shrug.

‘Did anything happen with you two; or were you just standing out in the rain picking up soccer balls?’

‘You wouldn’t understand.’ Someone like Marcel could never understand. Marcel rolls his eyes. ‘So did McClaren’s letter get sent to his old house?’ he prompts.

‘I think so. I never heard anything back from him.’ I take a long sip of my soda.

‘Why do you sound so sad about it?’

‘I’m not!’

I am a little. Besides Josh, John Ambrose McClaren matters the most to me of all the boys I have loved. There was just something so sweet about him.

It was the promise of maybe; one day. I think John Ambrose McClaren must be The One That Got Away. Aloud I say, ‘I mean; either he never got my letter, or he did, and-’ I-shrug. ‘I just always wondered how he

turned out. If he is still the same. I bet he is.'

'You know what; maybe he mentioned you once.' Slowly he says, 'Yeah; he did. He said he thought you were the prettiest girl in our grade. He said his one regret from middle school was not asking you to the eighth-grade formal.'

My whole body goes still- and I even stop breathing. 'For real?' I whisper.

Marcel busts up laughing. 'Dude! You're so gullible!'

My stomach squeezes. Blinking: I say, ‘That was mean. Why would you say that?’

Marcel stops laughing and says, ‘Hey; I’m sorry. I was just kidding-’

I reach across the table and punch him in the shoulder; hard. ‘You’re a jerk.’

He rubs his shoulder and cries out; ‘Ow! That hurt!’

‘Well; you deserved it.’

‘Sorry;’ he says again. But there is still a trace of laughter in his eyes; so, I turn my head away from him. ‘Hey; come on. Do not be mad. Who knows? He did like you.

Let us call him and find out.’

My head snaps up. ‘You have his phone number? You have John Ambrose McClaren’s number?’

Marcel pulls out his cell phone. ‘Sure. Let us call him right now.’

‘No!’ I try to grab his phone away from him, but he is too quick. He

holds his phone above my head, and I cannot reach. ‘Don’t you dare call him!’

‘Why not? I thought you were so curious about whatever happened to him.’ I shake my head fervently.

‘What are you so afraid of? That he doesn’t remember you?’ Something changes in his face; some dawning realization about me. ‘Or that he does?’

I shake my head...

‘That’s it.’ Marcel nods to himself; he tips back in his chair; his hands linked around his head.

I do not like the way he is looking at me. Like he thinks he has figured me out. I hold my palm out to him. ‘Give me your phone.’

Marcel’s jaw drops. ‘You’re going to call him? Right now?’

I like that I have surprised him. It makes me feel like I have won something back… I think throwing Marcel off guard could be a fun hobby for me. In a commanding voice, I’ve

only- ever used Kellie; I say, ‘Just give me your phone.’ Marcel hands me his phone, and I copy John’s number into mine. ‘I’ll call him when I feel like it; not because you feel like it.’

Marcel gives me a look of grudging respect. Of course- I am never going to call John, but Marcel K. does not need to know that.

That night: I am lying-in bed still thinking about John. It is fun to think of the what-if. Scary; but fun. It is like; I thought this door was closed before, but here it is open just the

tiniest crack. What if? What would that be like; me and John Ambrose McClaren?

If I close my eyes; I can almost picture it.

MARGOT AND I ARE ON the phone; it is Saturday afternoon here and Saturday night there.

‘Have you lined up an internship for the spring?’

‘Not yet-’

Margot lets out a sigh. ‘I thought you were going to try and do

something at Montpelier. I know they need help in the archives... Do you want me to call Donna for you?'

Margot did an internship at Montpelier for two summers and she loved it.

She was there for some important dig where they found a shard of Dolley Madison's China plate, and you would have thought they found diamonds or a dinosaur bone. Everybody loves Margot over there. When she left; they gave her a plaque for all her challenging work.

Daddy hung it up in the living room.

‘Montpelier’s too far of a drive;’ I say.

‘What about volunteering at the hospital?’ she suggests. ‘You could get a ride with Daddy on the days you have to go in.’

‘You know I don’t like the hospital.’ ‘Then the library! You like the library.’

‘I’ve already filled out an application;’ I lied.

‘Have you really?’

‘Or I was just about to...’

‘I shouldn’t have to push you to want things. You should want them for yourself. You need to take the initiative. I’m not always going to be beside you to push you.’

‘I know that...’

‘I mean; do you realize how important this year is; Lara Jean? It is kind of everything.

You don’t get a do-over- this is the junior year.’

I can feel tears and panic building up inside me. If she asks me another question; it will be too much, and I will cry.

‘Hello…?’ I speak.

‘I’m still here.’ My voice comes out tiny, and I know Margot knows how close I am to crying.

She pauses… ‘Look; you still have time; okay? I just do not want you to wait too long and have all the good placements go to other people; I am just worried about you is all. But everything’s fine; you’re still okay.’

‘Okay.’ Even just that one little word is an effort.

‘How’s everything else?’

I started this conversation wishing I could tell her about Marcel and everything that has been going on with me, but now I am just feeling relieved that there are all these miles between us, and she cannot see what I am up to. ‘Everything’s good;’ I say.

‘How’s Josh? Have you talked to him lately?’

‘Not really;’ I say. Which I have not. I have been so busy with Marcel I have not had a chance.

KELLIE AND I ARE ON the front steps. She is drinking her Korean yogurt drink and I am working on that scarf for Margot while I wait for Marcel. Kellie’s waiting for Daddy to come out. He is dropping her off at school today.

Ms. Rossinchild has not come outside yet. She is sick today or she is running even later than usual.

We have our eyes locked on her front door when a minivan drives down our street and slows in front of our house. I squint my eyes. It is Marcel.

Driving a tan minivan. He ducks his head out the window. ‘Are you coming or not?’

‘Why are you driving that?’ Kellie calls out.

‘Never mind that; Katherine;’ Marcel calls back. ‘Just get in…’

Kellie and I look at each other. ‘Me too?’ Kellie asks me.

I shrug. Then I lean back and open the front door and yell out; ‘Kellie’s getting a ride with me; Daddy!’

‘Okay!’ he yells back.

We stand up, but just then Ms. Rossinchild comes dashing out of the house in her navy-blue suit; briefcase in one hand; coffee in the other. Kellie and I look at each other gleefully. ‘Five; four; three-’

‘Damn it…!!!’

Giggling: we hurl ourselves toward Marcel’s minivan. I hop into the

passenger seat and Kellie climbs into the back. ‘What were you guys laughing about?’ He asks.

I am about to tell him when Josh walks out of his house. He stops and stares at us for a second before the waves. I wave back and Kellie hangs her head out the window and yells.

‘Hi; Josh…!’

‘What up;’ Marcel calls out; leaning over me.

‘Hey;’ Josh says back. Then he gets in his car.

Marcel pokes me in the side and grins and puts the car in reverse. ‘Tell me why you guys were laughing.’

Clicking on my seat belt; I say, ‘At least once a week; Ms. Rossinchild runs out to her car and spills hot coffee all over herself.’

Kellie pipes up; ‘It’s the funniest thing in the world.’

Marcel snorts. ‘You guys are sadistic.’

‘What’s sadistic?’ Kellie wants to know. She puts her head between us.

I push her back and say, ‘Put your seatbelt on.’

Marcel puts the car in reverse. ‘It means seeing other people in pain makes you happy.’

‘Oh.’ She repeats it to herself softly. ‘Sadistic.’

‘Don’t teach her weird stuff;’ I say.

‘I like weird stuff;’ Kellie protests.

Marcel says, ‘See? The kid likes weird stuff.’ Without turning

around, he lifts his hand for a high five and Kellie leans forward and slaps it heartily. ‘Hey; gimme a sip of whatever it is you’re drinking back there.’

‘It’s almost gone; so, you can have the rest;’ she says.

Kellie hands it over, and Marcel tips back the plastic container in his mouth.

‘This is good;’ he says.

‘It’s from the Korean grocery store;’ Kellie tells him. ‘They come in a pack, and you can put them in the

freezer and if you pack it for lunch; it'll be icy and cold when you drink it.'

'Sounds good to me. Lara Jean; bring me one of these tomorrow mornings; will you…?

For services rendered.'

I shoot him a dirty look and Marcel says, 'I mean the rides! Geez.'

'I'll bring you one; Marcel;' Kellie says.

'That's my girl.'

‘As long as you give me a ride to school tomorrow; too;’ Kellie finishes, and Marcel hoots.

BEFORE THE FOURTH PERIOD; IM AT my locker; trying to refine my milkmaid braid in the little mirror hanging from the door.

‘Lara Jean?’

‘Yes?’

I peek around the door, and it is Lucas Krapf, wearing a thin V-neck sweater in brilliant blue and stone-colored khakis. ‘I’ve had this for a while

now - I wasn’t going to say anything, but then I thought maybe you’d want it back.’ He puts a pink envelope in my hand. It is my letter. So, Lucas got his; too.

I drop it into my locker; make a yikes face at myself in the mirror, and then close the door. ‘So; you’re probably wondering what this is all about;’ I begin…

-And-

Then, I immediately falter. ‘It’s um; well; I wrote it a long time ago, and-’

‘You don’t have to explain.’

‘Really? You’re not curious?’

‘No. It was just nice to get a letter like that. I was pretty honored.’

I let out a relieved sigh and sag against my locker. Why is Lucas Krapf just so exactly right? He knows how to say the perfect thing.

And then Lucas gives me a half grimace, half-smile. ‘But the thing is-’

He lowers his voice. ‘You know I’m gay; right?’

‘Oh; right; totally;’ I say, trying not to sound disappointed. ‘No; I knew.’ So- Marcel was right.

Lucas smiles. ‘You’re so cute;’ he says, and I perk up again. Then he says, ‘Listen; can you not tell anybody; though? I mean; I am out, but I am not out-out yet. You know what I mean?’

‘Totally;’ I say, super confident.

‘For instance; my mom knows but my dad only knows. I haven’t outright told him.’

‘Got it…!’

‘I just let people believe what they please. I do not feel like it is my responsibility to quantify myself for them. I mean; you get what I am talking about. As a biracial person, I’m sure people are always asking you what race you are; right?’

I have not thought of it that way before; but yes- yes- yes! Lucas just gets it.

‘Exactly. It’s like; why do you need to know?’

‘Exactly.’

We smile at each other, and I feel that wonderful sensation of being known by someone. We walk together in the same direction; he has a Mandarin class and I have French…

At one point he asks me about Marcel, and I am tempted to tell him the truth because I am feeling so close to him. But Marcel and I made that pact- we explicitly said we would never tell anyone. I do not want to be the one to break it. So-o when Lucas says, ‘Hey; so, what’s the deal with you and-?’ I

just shrug and give him an enigmatic smile.

The Slit Kiss

‘It’s crazy; right? Because he is so -’ I search for the exact right word, but I can’t think of it. ‘I mean; he could play the part of a handsome guy in a movie.’ Hastily I add; ‘So could you; though. You’d play the guy the girl should pick.’

Lucas laughs, but I can tell he likes it.

Dear Lucas: I never met a boy with manners as good as yours. You ought to have a British accent. At homecoming, you wore a cravat and it suited you so well I think you could

wear one all the time and get away with it.

Oh; Lucas! I wish I knew what kind of girls you liked. As far as I can tell; you have not dated anyone - unless you have a girlfriend at another school. You are just so mysterious. I hardly know a thing about you. The things I know are so unsubstantial; so unsatisfying; like that, you eat a chicken sandwich every day at lunch, and you are on the golf team.

I guess the one remotely real thing I know about you is you are a

good writer, which must mean you have deep reserves of emotion. Like that short story you wrote in creative writing about the poisoned well, and it was from a six-year-old boy's perspective. It was so sensitive; so keen! That story made me feel like I knew you at least a little bit. But I do not know you, and I wish I did.

You are incredibly special. You are one of the most special people at our school, and I wish more people knew that about you. Or I do not

because sometimes it is nice to be the only one who knows something.

Love; Lara Jean-

AFTER SCHOOL; CHRIS, and Aire hanging out in my room. She is in trouble with her mom for staying out all night; so, she is hiding out over here until her mom leaves for the book club.

We are sharing a big bag of Kellie's Pirate Booty, which I am going to have to replace because she will complain if it is missing from her lunch on Monday.

Chris stuffs a handful of Pirate Booty puffs in her mouth. ‘Just tell me, Lara Jean. How far have you guys gone?’

I choke. ‘We’ve gone nowhere! And we have no plans to go anywhere shortly.’ Or ever…

‘Seriously? Not even over-the-bra action? A quick swipe across your chest?’

‘No! I told you; my sister and I aren’t like that.’

Chris snorts… ‘Are you joking me…? Of course, Margot and Josh have had sex. Quit being so naive; Lara Jean.’

‘This isn’t me being naive;’ I tell her. ‘I know that he and Margot haven’t done it.’ ‘How? How do you know ‘for a fact’? I’d love to hear this.’

‘I’m not telling you.’ If I tell Chris; she will only laugh more. She does not understand; she only has a little brother. She does not know how it is with sisters.

Margot and I; we made a pact; back in middle school.

We swore we would not have sex until we were married, or we were really; really in love and at least twenty-one. Margot might be really; really in love, but she is not married, and she is not twenty-one… She would never go back on her word. With sisters a pact is everything.

‘No; I’d love to know.’ Chris has that hungry glint in her eyes, and I know she is just getting warmed up.

‘You just want to make fun of it, and I’m not going to let you;’ I say.

Chris rolls her eyes. ‘Fine. But there’s no way they haven’t boned.’

I think Chris talks like that on purpose to get a reaction from me. She loves a reaction; so, I am careful to not give her one. I calmly say; ‘Can you please stop talking about my sister and Josh having sex. You know I don’t like it.’

Chris takes a permanent marker out of her bag and starts to color in her thumbnail.

‘You need to stop being such a scaredy-cat. Seriously, you have built it up in your head to be this huge; life-changing moment; but it was done in under five, and it’s not even the best part.’

I know she is waiting for me to ask what the best part is, and I am curious; but I ignore her and say, ‘permanent marker is toxic for your nails;’ to which she shakes her head at me like I am a lost cause.

I wonder, though - what would it be like? To be that close to a boy and

have him see all of you, no holding back. Would it be scary only for a second or two?

Or would it be scary the whole time? What if I did not like it at all? Or what if I liked it too much? It is a lot to think about.

‘DO YOU THINK- IF A- a guy and a girl have been dating for a long time; they’ve automatically had sex?’ I ask Marcel. We are sitting on the floor of the library; our backs against the wall of the reference section nobody ever goes to. It is after school; the

library's empty, and we are doing homework. Marcel gets Cs and Ds in chemistry; so, I have been helping him study.

Marcel looks up from his chem-book; suddenly interested. He tosses the book aside and says, 'I need more information. How long have they been dating?'

'A long time. Like two years; something like that.'

'How old are they...? Our age...?'

‘About…’

…?…

‘Then most likely but not necessarily. It depends on the girl and the guy. But if I had to put money on it; yes.’

‘But the girl’s not like that. The guy isn’t either.’

‘Who are we talking about here?’

‘That’s a secret.’ I hesitate, and then say; ‘Chris thinks there’s no way they haven’t.

She says it’s impossible.’

Marcel snorts. ‘Why are you going to her for advice? That girl is a train wreck.’

‘She is not a train wreck...!’

He gives me a look. ‘Shaddyman year she got wasted on Four Loko and she climbed up on Tyler Boylan’s roof and did a striptease.’

‘Were you there?’ I demand. ‘Did you see it with your own two eyes?’

‘Damn straight. Fished her clothes out of the pool like the gentleman I am.’

I blow out my cheeks. ‘Well; Chris never mentioned that story to me; so, like- I can’t speak to that. Besides, didn’t they ban Four Loko or whatever it’s called?’

‘They still make it, but a shitty watered-down version. You can dump Five-Hour Energy in it to get the same effect...’ I shudder, which makes Marcel smile. ‘What do you and Chris

even talk about?' he asks. 'You have nothing in common.'

'What do we talk about?' I counter…

Marcel laughs. 'Point taken.' He pushes away from the wall and puts his head in my lap, and I go completely still.

I try to make my voice sound normal as I say, 'You're in a really strange mood today.'

He raises an eyebrow at me. 'What kind of mood am I in?' Marcel

sure loves to hear about himself. Normally, I do not mind, but today I am not in the mood to oblige him. He already has too many people in his life telling him how great he is.

'The obnoxious kind;' I say, and he laughs.

'I'm sleepy.' He closes his eyes and snuggles against me. 'Tell me a bedtime story; Covey.'

'Don't flirt;' I tell him…

His eyes fly open. 'I wasn't!'

‘Yes; you were. You flirt with everyone. It’s like you can’t help yourself.’

‘Well; I don’t ever flirt with you.’ Marcel sits back up and checks his phone, and suddenly I am wishing I did not say anything at all…

I am IN FRENCH CLASS; LOOKING Out the window as I am wont to do, and that is when I see Josh walking toward the bleachers by the track. He is carrying his lunch, and he is alone. Why is he eating alone? He

has his comic-book group; he has Jersey Mike.

But I guess he and Jersey Mike did not hang out so much last year. Josh was always with Margot and me. The trio. And now we are not even a duo, and he is all alone. Part of it is Margot's fault for leaving; but I can see my part in it too; if I had never started liking him; I would not have had to make up this whole Marcel. story. I could just be his good friend Lara Jean like always.

Therefore, Mommy told Margot not to go to college with a boyfriend. When you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend; you only want to be with that person, and you forget about everybody else, and then when the two of you break up; you have lost all your friends. They were off doing fun stuff without you.

All I can say is Josh sure is a lonely figure eating his sandwich on the very top bleacher.

I took the bus home from school because Marcel had to leave

early for a lacrosse game with his club team. I am in front of the house; taking the mail out of our mailbox when Josh pulls into his driveway. ‘Hey!’ he calls out. He climbs out of his car and jogs over to me; his backpack slung over his shoulder.

‘I saw you on the bus;’ he says. ‘I waved, but you were doing your daydreaming thing. So how long’s your car going to be in the shop?’

‘I don’t know. It keeps changing. They had to order apart from; like; Indiana.’

Josh gives me a knowing look. ‘So, you’re secretly relieved; right?’

‘No! Why would I be relieved?’

‘Come on. I know you. You hate driving. You’re probably glad to have the excuse not to drive.’

I start to protest; but then I stop. There is no use. Josh knows me too well.

‘Well; maybe I’m a teeny-tiny bit relieved.’

‘If you ever need a ride; you know you can call me.’

I nod. I do know that. I would not call him for myself; but I would for Kellie; in an emergency.

‘I mean; I know you have - now, but I’m right next door. It is way more convenient for me to give you a ride to a school than him. I mean; it’s more environmentally responsible.’ I do not say anything, and Josh scratches the back of his neck.

‘I want to say something to you, but I feel weird bringing it up. Which is also weird; because we’ve always been able to talk to each other.’

‘We can still talk to each other;’ I say. ‘Nothing’s changed.’ That is the biggest lie I have ever told him, even bigger than the lie about my so-called dead twin Marcella. Until a couple of years ago; Josh thought I had a twin sister named Marcella who died of leukemia.

‘Okay. I feel like - I feel like you’ve been avoiding me ever since-’

He is going to say it. He is going to say it. I look down at the ground.

‘Ever since Margot broke up with me.’

My head snaps up. That is what he thinks? That I am avoiding him because of Margot…?

Did my letter make that little of an impact? I try to keep my face still and expressionless when I say, ‘I haven’t been avoiding you. I’ve just been busy.’

‘With- I know. You and I have known each other for a long time.

You are one of my best friends, Lara Jean. I don't want to lose you; too.'

It is the 'too' that is the sticking point... The 'too' is what stops me in my tracks. It sticks in my craw. Because if he had not said 'too;' it would be about me and him. Not about me and him and Margot.

'That letter you wrote-'

Too late... I do not want to talk about the letter anymore. Before he can say another word; I say, 'I'll always be your friend; Joshy.' And then I smile at him, and it takes a lot of effort. It takes

so much effort. But if I do not smile; I will cry.

Josh nods. ‘Okay. Good. So - so can we spend time together again?’

‘Sure…’

Josh reaches out and chucks my chin. ‘So; can I give you a ride to school tomorrow…?’

‘Okay;’ I say. Because was not that kind of the whole point of this? To be able to hang out with Josh again without that letter hanging over our

heads. To just be his good friend Lara Jean again?

After dinner, I teach Kellie how to do laundry. She resists me at first, but I tell her that this is a job we are all sharing from now on; so-o she would better just accept it.

'When the buzzer goes off; that means it's done, and you have to fold it right away or it'll get wrinkled.'

To both of our surprise, Kellie likes doing laundry. Mostly because she can sit in front of the TV and fold and watch her shows in peace.

‘Next time I’ll teach you how to iron.’

‘Ironing; too? Who am I; Cinderella?’

I ignore her. ‘You’ll be good at ironing. You like precision and clean lines.

You’ll probably be better at it than me.’

This piqued her interest. ‘Yeah; maybe. Your stuff always looks wrinkled no matter what.’

After we finish the laundry; Kellie and I are washing up in the bathroom we share.

There are two sinks; Margot had the one on the left and Kellie and I used to fight over who the sink on the right belonged to. It is hers now…

Kellie’s brushing her teeth and I am putting on a cucumber-aloe face mask; when Kellie says to me; ‘Do you think if I asked; Marcel would take us to McDonald’s tomorrow on the way to school?’

I rub another dollop of green face mask onto my cheeks. ‘I don’t want you getting used to Marcel giving us rides. You’re taking the bus from now on; okay?’

Kellie pouts. ‘Why!’

‘Because. Besides, Marcel’s not giving me a ride tomorrow; Josh is.’

‘But won’t Marcel be mad?’

My face is getting tight from the mask drying. Through clenched teeth, I say; ‘Nah. He’s not the jealous type.’

‘Then who’s the jealous type?’

I do not have a satisfactory answer for that. Who is the jealous type? I am mulling this over when Kellie giggles at me in the mirror and says, ‘You look like a zombie.’

I hold my hands out to her face and she ducks away. In my best zombie voice, I say, ‘I want to eat your brains.’

Kellie runs away, screaming.

When I am back in my room; I text Marcel that I do not need a ride to

school tomorrow. I do not tell him Josh is giving me a ride. Just in case.

TODAY'S NOTE FROM Marcel SAYS, Tart and Tangy after school?

He is drawn two boxes; a yes or a no. I check yes and drop the note in his locker.

After school ends, I meet Marcel in his car, and we caravan with his lacrosse friends to Tart and Tangy. I order an original frozen yogurt with Capping Crunch and strawberries and kiwi and pineapple, and Marcel gets key lime with crushed-up Oreos. I pull

out my wallet to pay for my yogurt, but Marcel stops me. He winks at me and says, ‘I got this.’ I whisper; ‘I thought you weren't ever paying for anything.’

‘My boys are here. I can’t look like a cheap-ass in front of my boys.’ Then he puts his arm around me and says loudly; ‘For as long as you’re my girl; you don’t pay for frozen yogurt.’

I roll my eyes, but I am not going to say no to a free frozen yogurt. No boy has ever paid for me before. I could get used to this kind of nice treatment...

I was bracing myself to see Genevieve here, but she does not show. I think Marcel's wondering too because he keeps his eyes on the door. With Genevieve, I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. So far- she has been eerily; disturbingly quiet. She is hardly ever in the cafeteria during lunch because she and Emily Nussbaum have been eating off-campus, and when I see her in the hallways; she smiles at me without showing her teeth; which is somehow more menacing.

When is she going to strike back against me? When will I have my Jamila Singh moment? Chris says Genevieve's too obsessed with her college boyfriend to care about me and Marcel, but I do not believe it. I have seen the way she looks at him.

Like he is hers.

The boys put a few tables together and we take over the place. It is just like at the lunch table; with them being loud; talking about the football game coming up on

Friday. I do not think I can say two words. I do not have anything to add. I just eat my free frozen yogurt and enjoy the fact that I am not at home organizing my shoe closet or watching the Golf Channel with my dad.

Continued- 1

We’re walking to our cars when Gabe says, ‘Hey; Lara Jean; did you know that if you say your name fast; it sounds like Large? Try it! Lara Jean.’

Dutifully I repeat; ‘Lara Jean. Largy. Actually, it sounds more like Largy; not Large.’

Gabe nods to himself and announces; ‘I’m going to start calling you Large.

You are so little it is funny. Right? Like those big guys who go by the name Tiny?’

I shrug. ‘Sure.’

Gabe turns to Darrell. ‘She’s so little she could be our mascot.’

‘Hey; I’m not that small;’ I protest.

‘How tall are you?’ Darrell asks me.

‘Five two;’ I fib. It is more like five and a quarter.

Tossing his spoon in the trash; Gabe says, ‘You’re so little you could fit in my pocket!’

All the guys laugh. Marcel’s smiling in a bemused way. Then Gabe suddenly grabs me and throws me over

his shoulder like I am a kid, and he is, my dad.

‘Gabe! Put me down!’ I shriek, kicking my legs and pounding on his chest.

He starts spinning around in a circle, and all the guys are cracking up. ‘I’m going to adopt you; Large! You are going to be my pet. I’ll put you in my old hamster cage!’

I am giggling so hard I cannot catch my breath and I am starting to feel dizzy.

‘Put me down!’

‘Put her down; man;’ Marcel says, but he is laughing too.

Gabe runs toward somebody’s pickup truck and sets me down in the back.

‘Get me out of here!’ I yell. Gabe’s already running away. All the guys start getting into their cars.

‘Bye; Large!’ they call out. Marcel jogs over to me and extends his hand so I can hop down.

‘Your friends are crazy;’ I say, jumping onto the pavement...

‘They like you;’ he says.

‘Really?’

‘Sure… They used to hate when I would bring Gen places. They don’t mind if you spend time together with us.’ Marcel slings his arm around me. ‘Come on; Large. I’ll take you home.’

As we walk to his car; I let my hair fall in my face; so, he does not see me smiling. It sure is nice being part of a group; feeling like I belong.

I VOLUNTEERED TO BAKE Six Dozen cupcakes for Kellie’s PTA bake sale. I did it because Margot’s done it for the past two years. Margot only ever did it because she did not want people to think Kellie’s family was not involved enough in PTA. She did brownies both times, but I signed up for cupcakes because I thought they would be a bigger hit. I bought a few various kinds of blue sprinkles and I made little toothpick flags that say BLUE MOUNTAIN ACADEMY. I thought Kellie would have fun helping me decorate.

But now I am realizing Margot's way was better; because with brownies; you just pour them into the pan; bake, and slice, and there you go. Cupcakes are a lot more work. You must scoop the perfect amount six dozen times, and then you must wait for them to cool, and then you are-e frosting and sprinkling.

I am measuring out my eighth cup of flour when the doorbell rings. 'Kellie!' I scream.

'Get the door!'

It rings again. 'Kellie!'

From upstairs she screams back; ‘I’m running an important experiment!’

I run to the door and fling it open without bothering to check who it is.

Marcel: He busts up laughing.

‘You have flour all over your face;’ he says, dusting off my cheeks with the backs of his hands.

I twist away from him and wipe my face with my apron. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘We’re going to the game. Didn’t you read my note from yesterday?’

‘Oh; shoot. I had a test and I forgot.’ Marcel frowns and I add; ‘I can’t go anyway because I have to bake seventy-two cupcakes by tomorrow.’

‘On a Friday night?’

‘Well - yes.’

‘Is this for the PTA bake sale?’ Marcel brushes past me and starts taking off his sneakers. ‘You guys are a no-shoes house; right?’

‘Yeah;’ I say, surprised. ‘Is your mom making something too?’

‘Rice Krispie treats.’ Another way smarter choice than seventy-two cupcakes.

‘Sorry; you came over here for nothing. We can go to the game next Friday;’ I say, expecting him to put his shoes back on.

But he does not; he wanders into the kitchen and sits on a stool. Huh? ‘Your house looks the same as I remembered;’ he says, looking around. He points at the framed picture of me

and Margot taking a bath when we were babies. ‘Cute.’

I can feel my cheeks burn. I go and turn the photo over. ‘When have you ever been to my house?’

‘Back in seventh grade. Remember how we would spend time together me together in your neighbor’s treehouse? I had to pee once, and you let me use your bathroom.’

‘Oh; yes;’ I say.